

Revisiting a royal past

Located in the Kodagu district of Karnataka, the Nalknad Palace was built in the late 18th century during the reign of King Vira Rajendra, perhaps as a place of refuge for him as he was then fighting Tipu Sultan. The two-storeyed structure is replete with pavilions, intricately carved wooden pillars, and a host of paintings across several rooms. While it is not yet known how long ago the paintings were made, they depict scenes from the court and images of royalty.

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This page, top: front view of the palace with the pavilion on the right
Opposite page, clockwise from left: front view of the pavilion; Nagamandala carved on one of the pillars of the palace; snake carvings on the pillars at the entrance

The Tandiamamol Range looms in the distance, as the road winds its way along picturesque coffee plantations. Standing at a slight elevation on the foothills and facing the massive peak is the Nalknad Palace, constructed between 1792 and 1794.^[1]

The Nalknad Palace is located about 40 kilometres from Madikeri or Mercara, the capital of Coorg during the 17th century, and was built during the reign of King Vira Rajendra. It was probably constructed as a safe haven for the king, who was then fighting Tipu Sultan. The Palace gets its name from four

villages or *naal-nad*, in the local language, and is often referred to as the last refuge of the kings of Coorg. The four villages are small, and barely visible from the road, which ends abruptly at what appears to be a school, with no indication of a palace nearby.

A closer look reveals that the school is built along a wall, which appears to be much older. A path alongside leads beyond the school, to an arched gateway which announces the presence of the Nalknad Palace.

The arched gateway leads to a garden, with a small pavilion on one side. The pavilion is built of brick and stucco and resembles a shrine, with arched entrances on all four sides, a spire, and



cows on the four corners of the roof, as is seen in local temples. The side walls have niches, with images of deities, of which only a few can be identified. One such image appears to be that of Krishna, while another depicts the Sun and the Moon.

This pavilion, or more accurately, a *mandap*, is said to have been constructed for the second marriage of Vira Rajendra, which was attended by a deputation from the English commissioner at Malabar. Considering the purpose, the *mandap* is surprisingly small, with little space for ceremonial rites.

The Palace itself is quite simple – a two-storeyed structure, with beautifully carved, wooden pillars, and a tiled roof, conforming to the local architecture and resembling the bigger houses in the region.

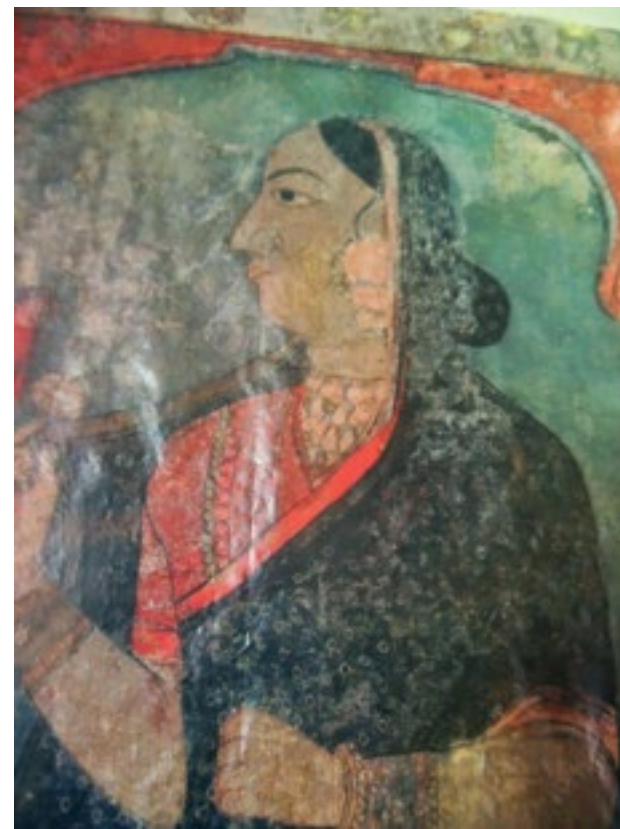
On the ground level is a porch, and the pillars have floral carvings, interspersed with Nagamandalas, or snake patterns. Snakes are considered auspicious in the region as symbols of fertility and longevity, and therefore worshipped. Their presence here could be for protection as well, considering that this must have been a safe haven for





This page, clockwise from far left: an image of Krishna carved into one of the niches of the pavilion; carvings of the Sun and the Moon in the pavilion; a detailed view of a painting depicting soldiers in a procession; a complete view of the same painting

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: a close-up of a woman in the painting in the Queen's room; another part of the painting of the procession showing the faces of the soldiers; a painting of women in the Queen's room



the kings, away from their stronghold. On one wall of this porch are remnants of paintings, which give an indication of just how spectacular and intricate they must once have been. At the centre is the king, (probably Vira Rajendra?) riding an elephant, and along with him are men, probably soldiers, with more elephants. The men carry banners, suggesting that it's a procession. The path seems to be lined with trees, coconut trees dominating the landscape, and one tree with individual leaves depicted, as in miniature paintings, on the right. The porch would once have been the place where the king held court while in residence, and it is no wonder that this is the most impressive of all the paintings in the Palace. There are more paintings in the Palace, though most of these are recent – having been painted during the course of a film shoot a few years ago. The only other evidence of the original paintings is in a small room on the first floor, believed to have been the queen's room. Here, the paintings are different. Only one panel survives, and this shows three women – two facing the third figure. All are dressed in sarees, but the two on one side appear to belong to the royal family. Both wear jewellery, and the sarees are elaborately decorated with patterns, which may once have been gilded, going by the shine still evident. The third figure is not only simpler, but also smaller and cramped, suggesting she could be a servant or an attendant. The two royal women could be the two wives of Vira Rajendra, or they could be his second wife, and a relative. The most intriguing thing about this mural is that all the three women are wearing sarees in the north Indian style, with their

heads covered. The unique drape that women from Coorg wear is missing here. The style of dressing, including the jewellery, especially the nose-ring, suggests that these women are not originally from Coorg. The second wife of Vira Rajendra has been mentioned as Mahadevamma, but there is no further reference to her antecedents. Could she perhaps be from the border of present-day Karnataka and Maharashtra? Or are these paintings from a later period and depict other women? We can only speculate. It is not clear whether Vira Rajendra built the palace as a refuge or as a getaway. However, the palace was witness to both, his rise and fall. He married and sired children here, and this was where he lived when he won back the fort of Mercara, from Tipu Sultan, with the help of the British. He gained a semblance of control over his kingdom, while remaining beholden to the British for their help. This state of peace, however, did not last very long. Vira Rajendra, by all accounts, [2][3] was devoted to his second wife, who bore him four daughters before passing away in 1807. After his wife's death, he developed paranoia. He constantly feared for his life, and that of his daughters, and ordered the killing of anyone he perceived as a threat. On one occasion, alerted to an assassination attempt, Vira Rajendra, and his personal guards are said to have massacred over 300 locals, who had risen against him in protest. In the words of an old servant who witnessed the massacre, [4] blood ran out of the palace yard, as the rain on a heavy monsoon day! The palace witnessed more bloodshed as



Vira Rajendra's insanity progressed, and did not even end with his death in 1809. The carnage continued, for possession of the throne. Linga Raja, the younger brother of the deceased king, took charge in the name of his niece. He soon deposed her entirely, and set forth his own claim to the succession. Vira Rajendra's daughter, the one he intended to be queen, married and had four children. Deprived of the throne by her uncle and cousins, she died in obscurity, while her husband and children were murdered in the very palace built by her father. The throne of Coorg managed to survive only for a few more years, with the last king, Vira Rajendra's nephew, named after him as Vira Raja, deposed in 1834. Coorg now was ruled by the British. The Nalknad Palace is often called "the last refuge" of the kings of Coorg. It does not seem to have been much of a refuge, and its location deep in the mountains does not seem to have kept the family safe. Instead, the Palace which was witness to carnage and the bloodshed, seems to have survived, unlike the kings. The Palace, newly built at the time of the king's second marriage, must have been decked up for the celebration. With the English contingent expected, as well as the whole local population eager to welcome their new queen, the Palace must have been as well adorned as the bride. The paintings in the porch and the bridal room would probably have been painted then. With the passage of time, the paintings were probably ignored. At some stage, they were covered with plaster, and painted over with bright new synthetic paints. All these paintings have been



covered with plastic sheets, and are in a precarious state. That they exist at all, today, is all thanks to the conservation efforts of INTACH, which salvaged them after they were painted over during the film shoot mentioned earlier. Now, after all these years, the paintings have been brought to life again, at least part of them. Though the paintings too seem to have gone through the same ups and downs that the kings of Coorg did, at Nalknad they, unlike the royal family, have managed to survive, against all odds.

NOTES:
 [1] Mysore and Coorg, Gazetteer compiled for the Government of India, Volume III, Coorg, by Lewis Rice, Bangalore, 1878.
 [2] Coorg and its Rajahs, by an officer formerly in the service of His Highness Veer Rajunder Wadeer, Rajah of Coorg, London, 1857.
 [3] Most of what we know of the history of this period comes straight from Vira Rajendra's own chronicles of his achievements, recorded in Kannada, and translated by Lieutenant Robert Abercrombie into English. Both references mention these memoirs.

[4] Rajendraname, Compiled by Rajah Dodda Vira Rajendra., Translated by Lt R. Abercrombie, 1857.